Denison Journal of Religion

Volume 11 Article 5

2012

Making Room for Two in One: The Conflictive Relationship between American and Catholic Identities in American Literature

Kimberly Anne Humphrey
Denison University

Making Room for Two in One: The Conflictive Relationship between American and Catholic Identities in American Literature

Kimberly Anne Humphrey

People have long pondered the question of coexisting or vying identities. In America, many were particularly concerned about the intersection of civic and religious identity due to the importance of the distinction between church and state. Many believed it would be impossible for religious people to assert their religious identity to its fullest and remain fully American. Individuals are defined by their identities; can someone fully claim more than one identity? Are we able to give ourselves over to more than one set of standards? This debate is particularly poignant when discussing American identity and Catholic identity because of the long struggle over loyalty that has marked the history of Catholicism in America. The authors examined in this project testify to this issue's continued relevance and significance.

In Edwin O'Connor's novel *The Edge of Sadness* Hugh Kennedy is a priest and recovering alcoholic. His commitment to his vocation is strong but he struggles with its demands and trails. His reacquaintance with his childhood friends, the Carmody family, only serves to highlight his struggles. One of the first difficulties that Hugh is encountering in his rather rundown parish is that the face of Catholicism in the United States is changing. Hugh grew up in time when American Catholics were European and even that group was divided further by parish—Irish Catholics, German Catholic, and Polish Catholics rarely interacted. However, Catholics in America now had changing and merging ethnic backgrounds. Hugh's own parish was drastically different from the strictly Irish Catholic parish in which he grew up:

> The section of the city is dying, and so is Old St. Paul's. In a sense, it is hardly a parish at all anymore, but a kind of spiritual waterhole: a halting place for transients in despair. Still, we have our permanent families, those who live and stay here: Syrians, Greeks, some Italians, a few Chinese, the advanced guard of Puerto Ricans—a racial spectrum whose pastor I am. Here the pastor cuts quite a different figure than he does in the old, compact, all-Irish parishes…They accept me as their priest, but after that they keep their distance—and I must admit (and this is perhaps my fault, my dereliction) that I keep mine. And I must admit this, too: that sometimes, in the rectory, at night,

> I think with a little longing of the old days, the old ways—because, after all, a man can turn his back on something and still remember it. [1]

The individuals that makeup the "Catholic" banner in the United States changed rapidly between the time when Hugh was a young priest and the time when he is pastoring at this needy parish. This is unsurprising, especially when the demographic changes that the nation as a whole went through are considered. Hugh struggles as he tries to find out how to be a good priest to a population he does not relate to and struggles to understand. This time, America and Catholicism are changing in the same way and at the same time, and neither identity is prepared for its rapid redefinition. The American and Catholic identities often appear to be in constant conflict, but that is simply untrue. The conflict does occur, but oft times American and Catholic identity run parallel to each other instead of colliding.

Father Hugh continues his pattern of representing the American identity instead of standing in conflict with it in his Norman Rockwell-esque nostalgia for his typically American boyhood neighborhood: "I find that I have a lasting love for this place, which is so obviously just a place, which has no particular beauty or grace, or grandeur of scene, but which is, quite simply, a neighborhood, *my* neighborhood, a compound of sights and smells and sounds that have furnished all my years."[2] Hugh's connection with his childhood home manages to highlight both his Catholic and his American identity. His neighborhood is clearly an Irish Catholic one that is steeped in its cultural and religious background. On the other hand, Hugh's sentimentality about his neighborhood is quintessentially American. The middleclass American neighborhood is representative of the American dream—of the success that springs from the hard work of individuals and the freedoms offered by the United States government. The soft spot that Hugh shows for his hometown is therefore indicative of both his American and Catholic identities. Father Hugh's American and Catholic identities are able to rest side by side, but for many American Catholics the reconciliation between the two is not as cut and dry.

Father Urban in J.F. Powers' *Morte d'Urban* is an intensely American character and at times that trait seems to supersede his Catholicism. Father Urban is a well-known priest on the retreat circuit despite the fact that his order of St. Clementine is less than prestigious. Most expect that Urban will be going on to bigger and better things in the years to come, but when his superior assigns him to a rundown retreat house in rural Minnesota he accepts the change with as much grace

[1] Edwin O'Connor, *The Edge of Sadness* (Chicago: Loyola Classics, 1961), 23-24.
[2] Ibid, 60-61.

as possible.[3] In his new location, it still did not take Urban long before he was once again rubbing elbows with the wealthy in the area. Father Urban develops a rather wide streak of individualism and self-interest over the course of his life, and though his beginnings were far more humble he began to question the relationship between Catholic and American identity early on in his life:

> If you were a Catholic boy like Harvey Roche, you felt that it was their country, handed down to them by the Pilgrim, George Washington, and others, and that they were taking a risk letting you live in it. It wasn't that they remembered what tyrants (not *all* of them Catholics) had done to non-conformists in the past. They did not see themselves as descendants of the poor and oppressed. No, although that might be history, that was not it. What troubled them was the hocus-pocus that went on in Catholic churches. And Harvey Roche, as a boy, didn't blame them. *Wasn't* it all very strange there, in that place, at that time, the fancy vestments, the Latin, the wine? What if Catholics were Protestants and Protestants were Catholics, and *they* worshiped in such a manner? What would Catholics think?[4]

In his childhood, Hugh was inundated with the fact that Protestantism was the norm in America and that Catholicism was suspicious. Hugh, even as a young man, seemed to identify more with the American than the Catholic—he can separate himself from his religious tradition to view it from the perspective of the suspicious American. In fact, he seems to find the entire drama to be innately suspicious. His American identity has overwhelmed his Catholic identity. He could not occupy both mindsets at the same time, and so his Catholicism was placed under suspicion.

As Urban gets older and begins rubbing shoulders with powerful non-Catholics his need to assert his own American-ness gets stronger. For instance, when Urban is asked to give a speech at a local country club, he makes every attempt to clarify and diminish some of the more distinct Catholic doctrines, such as the infallibility of the Pope. He jokingly tells the audience that even Catholics in Rome do not have to believe the Pope in his weather predictions.[5] A woman in the audience presses him to clarify his meaning: "Oh, the example you give is ridiculous, of course, but isn't the Holy Father entitled to all the respect we can give him? As Christ's vicar on earth?" Urban, however, realizing that to affirm the woman's question would be set him at a distinct disadvantage with the powerful and Protestant men attending, sets the woman down rather harshly: "As a Catho-

[3] J.F. Powers, *Morte d'Urban* (New York: Double Day & Company, 1962), 30.
[4] Ibid, 76.
[5] Ibid, 98.

lic—that is, as one who respects *proper* authority—I'm afraid I'd be more inclined to trust the weather bureau in such a matter."[6] This instance shows yet again that Father Urban feels that there is a clear divide between what characterizes Catholic identity and American identity and yet again he feels the need to protect his interests by sacrificing Catholicism for Americanism.

Urban desperately tries to hold on to some elements of that Americanism, even if the face of Church hierarchy. This is particularly true as Urban tries to defend the individual in an institution that places the highest emphasis on the individual. For instance, Urban tries to defend an elderly woman for some superstitious eccentricities she has developed in old age against a monsignor who is ready to damn the woman: "What if she is only motivated by old age and fear of the Lord? That's enough, thank God. It takes all kinds to make the Church."[7] Urban sees the power and the worth of the individual in a very American manner—the individual should not have to sacrifice his/her particularities in order to be a welcomed part of the community. America is the land of the individual and Catholicism asks its believers to place the community above their own needs or desires.

Urban long desired to find a way to live out fully both his Catholic and American identity. However, Urban found himself living in circumstances that repeatedly made him choose to throw in his lot with one or another. Urban, when push came to shove, often settled on the side of his American identity whether it was a matter of retaining his reputation, defending others' right to their individuality, or realizing that much of Catholicism felt foreign even to him , a priest raised in the tradition.

Walker Percy's 1971 novel, *Love in the Ruins*, presents a world that has much abandoned tradition. In fact, the world that Percy depicts is one in which science and technology has begun to reign supreme and spiritual fulfillment and emotional connectivity have been left to rot. The hero, Dr. Tom More (descendant of Saint Thomas More), is an alcoholic and deeply disturbed psychologist. He is also a lapsed Catholic, his faith having been greatly diminished after the death of his daughter. Tom, and everyone else in this bleak vision of America, has become intensely isolated from himself and his community. In an effort to help reduce the isolation, Tom creates the ontological lapsometer which can diagnose any psychiatric issue instantly. Unfortunately, it takes some time before Tom figures out how to take the invention from diagnostic to treatment and in the meantime it falls into the wrong hands. Unfortunately, the lapsometer can also be used to worsen conditions and its use could produce a world full of sociopaths. Tom has to step in before there are cataclysmic consequences.

[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid, 148.

Tom sees this looming catastrophe that threatens the United States to be tied to the rescinding of God's grace on the country.[8] This could be connected to the fact that the members of the population seem to have become irreligious. Even those religions that do remain have lost their sanctity. The Catholic Church, for instance, has split into three: The American Catholic Church, the Dutch Schismatics "who believe in relevance but not God," and the Roman Catholic remnant.[9] All three branches of this once united religion have either lost their spirituality or their spirit. The American Catholic Church, for instance, "emphasizes property rights and the integrity of the niegborhoods…and plays *The Star Spangled Banner* at the elevation."[10] The remaining Roman Catholics, on the other hand, are "scattered and demoralized" and have only one priest remaining and no church building intact.[11] Tom counts himself among the latter as he still believes in the creed of the Roman Catholic Church, but he also knows himself to be a "bad one."[12] He has left behind the beliefs and ceremonies that defined his earlier faith:

> Some years ago, however, I stopped eating Christ in Communion, stopped going to mass, and have since fallen into a disorderly life. I believe in God and the whole business but I love women best, music and science next, whiskey next, God fourth, and my fellowman hardly at all. Generally, I do as I please. A man, wrote John, who says he believes in God and does not keep his commandments is a liar. If John is right, then I am a liar. Nevertheless, I still believe.[13]

The Catholics in this book have either so confused their religious and their national identity that the two have completely merged, or their religious and national identities have both been degraded to the point of no longer being fulfilling or relevant. The reader finds both possibilities frightening, particularly with the effective examples that Percy uses to demonstrate the pitfalls of each. For instance, when discussing the American Catholic Church, he mentions the importance of "Property Rights Sunday."[14] Property Rights Sunday is one of the most significant holidays in the year of the American Catholic Church: "A blue banner beside the crucifix shows Christ holding the American home, which has a picket fence, in his two hands."[15] For most, their Catholic and American identities have bonded so much together as to become inseparable and deconstructing both in the process,

[8] Walker Percy, *Love in the Ruins* (New York: Picador, 1971), 4.
[9] Ibid, 5-6.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid, 173.
[15] Ibid, 181.

or they have become so polarized and isolated that they no longer serve a function.

By the time the reader meets Tom, he has given up on the idea that religion will serve any real function for him; instead it seems to be a group of complex beliefs that he desires to hold on to without really working to live in accordance with any of them. Tom does reflect, however, on a time when he did continue to participate in the rituals of his religion hoping that they will serve him well. The reader comes to realize that even at that point in his life the fulfillment of that practice was intensely individualistic—intensely American—and unrelated to the improvement of the community:

> The best of times were after mass on summer evenings when Samantha and I would walk home in the violet dusk, we having received Communion and I rejoicing afterwards, caring nought for my fellow Catholics but only for myself and Samantha and Christ swallowed, remembering what he promised me for eating him, that I would have life in me, and I did, feeling so good that I'd sing and cut the fool all the way home like King David before the Ark.[16]

Tom's religious fervor is intensely personal and is based upon his own personal satisfaction, not the improvement of his community or the well-being of others. It is a faith that claims that everyone is responsible for their own salvation as individuals finding God instead of the more traditionally conceived Catholic notion of faith as a communal activity that is fulfilled through engaging in the world.

Tom does not see his religion as one that requires involvement in the world. In fact, he sees his own faith as one that simply recognizes a God and then goes about its business without being influenced by that fact. A Protestant woman he is involved with, however, exemplifies a religion that backs away from the Godliness of religion and instead emphasis doing right. This presentation leads the reader to believe that the American identity's focus is on action and beliefs are less important. This can be seen in American culture today—as long as you do not do anything to attract negative attention to yourself, you can do as you please:

> Ellen, though she is a strict churchgoer and a moral girl, does not believe in God. Rather does she believe in the Golden Rule and in doing right. She doesn't need God. What does God have to do with being honest, hard-working, chaste, upright, unselfish etcetera. I on the other hand believe in God, the Jews, Christ, the whole business. Yet I don't do right. I am a Renaissance pope, an immoral believer[17]

[16] Ibid, 13.
[17] Ibid, 157.

This inverts traditional distinctions between Catholicism and Protestantism and raises the question of what the Catholic identity really means to most Catholics today. Walker has presented the reader with two extremes in the case of American and Catholic identities. Tom can either merge his American and Catholic identity so completely that they lose all specificity, or he can try desperately to hold on to a religion that has lost its distinctions and power as it struggled to remain. The only way to retain both an American identity and a Catholic identity that have any worth is to find a way into the middle. All of the options given to the characters in *Love at the End of the World* are caricatures of problems that exist today and the only way to avoid the satire becoming a reality is to find a way to balance national and religious identities. This book indicates that Catholics should allow their Catholicism and their Americanism to inform each other without allowing them to overtake the purpose and standards of the other. Catholics will only be able to find satisfaction in their national and religious identities if there is a balance acknowledged between the two. Both identities also need to have a specific role to fill so that it is easier to distinguish when it is more appropriate to identify with one identity over another.

For priests, whose entire lives are devoted to their religion, it must be more difficult to find a way to leave some distance between their Catholic identity and their other American identity. Priests are often struck in the crossfire when they have to mediate between the cultural context that they and their parishioners live in and the social and theological demands of the church. In Andrew Greeley's novel, *The Cardinal Sins*, the liberal parish priest and academic, Father Kevin Brennan, has to toe the line between advising his people in line with the teachings of the Church while giving them the freedom of individual choice that the United States' mentality champions. For instance, when a childhood friend and his wife are trying to decide about the appropriateness of using birth control, Father Kevin is placed in a difficult place as his personal opinions and Church teaching disagree. Kevin knows that Ellen has had too many children too quickly and that her health and her marriage depend on her taking a break from pregnancy. Kevin is forced to counsel his advice to her confused husband: "'I'm sure that Ellen wouldn't want to do anything that she had decided in her conscience sinful,' I said carefully. 'She should heed her conscience.' The parish safe seemed to glare at me for my departure from orthodoxy."[18] Kevin tries desperately to offer Ellen and her husband, Tim, the freedom to follow their individual consciences instead of official Church teaching. Her husband, however, cannot accept this disobedience

[18] Andrew Greeley, *The Cardinal Sins* (New York: Forge Books, 1981), 153.

and leaves the confessional convinced that Father Kevin told him that to use birth control would be a mortal sin.[19] The Catholic identity of Father Kevin, Ellen, and Tim make it difficult for them to make very personal decisions that are far simpler for their Protestant counterparts. Both the American mindset and Protestantism value the experience of the individual and therefore they have considerably more freedom in making such decisions.

This mindset is one that Kevin, Ellen, and Tim could not escape; they grew up in American society and now actively participate in that society as adults. Their Catholic identity, however, has an equally strong grasp and that identity speaks of a universal moral and social standard that allows for less wiggle room for individuals. Priests and lay people both struggle with this dichotomy as they have to make decisions about what mindset they wish to follow. If they are willing to quietly disagree with the Church on some matters and go about their life, do they surrender their entire Catholic identity? Can some pieces of that identity be salvaged while others are carefully discarded? Can American Catholics retain a strong sense of American individualism and a strong sense of Catholic community, or are the two mutually exclusive? Can the individual thrive in the community? For a long time, Protestants claimed that the hierarchical power structure of the Catholic Church prevented Catholics from retaining any unique thoughts—essentially, Protestants claimed that Catholics were brainwashed.

Catholics would disagree—there has always been differing opinions in existence within the Catholic Church, and to make a claim on Catholicism is not to assert one undisputed identity. This truth gains even more significance when you consider that no person consists of only one identity. Catholics, like everyone else, claim multiple identities, all which have to interact. At times, the identities inevitable clash or disagree. Sometimes individuals are able to find ways to reconcile these disagreements and sometimes the internal conflict is forced to stand and leaves the individual without a clear answer. Depending on their priorities, Catholics can be forced to reconsider decisions in light of their Americanism, or Americans can be forced to reconsider decisions on light of their Catholicism. This can severely complicate decision-making and can lead people into a cyclical thought pattern that can never be answered. Who is to say, however, that this is necessarily a negative process? Catholicism and Americanism complicate each other; while this often makes decision making more difficult it also results in a more sophisticated understanding of each side of the argument and an ability to sympathize with a broader spectrum of people. Maybe this means that American

[19] Ibid.

Catholics have to struggle more with their moral and social decisions, but they also have a richer understanding of the issue which can lead to more informed and well balanced actions. These dueling identities can cause complications, but they also lead to a fuller understanding of the world around them and the people that inhabit that world—on both sides of many issues.

WORKS CITED

Greeley, Andrew. *The Cardinal Sins*. New York: Forge Books, 1981. Print.
O'Connor, Edwin. *The Edge of Sadness*. Chicago: Loyola Press, 1961. Print.
Percy, Walker. *Love in the Ruins: The Behavior of a Bad Catholic at the Time Near the End Of the World*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971. Print.
Powers, J.F. *Morte d'Urban*. New York: New York Book Review Classics, 1962. Print.